

## Life in a weedy lawn

### Introduction

Until 28 December 2009, I had not realised how interesting a patch of weeds could be. On that day I was walking along a foot-path near the north-west side of the intersection of Blackburn and Normanby Roads in the Melbourne suburb of Notting Hill, when I noticed a caterpillar on a Dandelion *Taraxacum officinale* flower. Pausing for a closer look, I soon found many more caterpillars (see figure on p. 150) on Dandelion and Cat's Ear (Flatweed) *Hypochoeris radicata* flowers. Wondering what they were the larvae of, I started looking for butterflies and moths. Over a period of about 12 weeks early in 2010, I found not only butterflies and moths, but numerous other creatures as well.

### Plants and fungi

Several years ago, this particular area was landscaped, and all existing vegetation was removed. Turf was laid in 2005, and watered regularly until established. On 28 January 2006, during very humid weather, a host of fruit-bodies of the fungus *Conocybe lactea* emerged from the turf. I have not seen this fungus in the area since.

Today, the grass is interspersed with a variety of weeds, especially along Blackburn Road. Most obvious are Dandelion, Cat's Ear and Hawkbit *Leontodon taraxocoides*, all with bright yellow flowers. Others include: Purslane *Portulaca oleracea*, Smallflower Mallow *Malva parviflora*, Redflower Mallow *Modiola caroliniana*, Common (ribbed) Plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, Buck's Horn Plantain *P. coronopus*, Capeweed *Arctotheca calendula*, Blackberry Nightshade *Solanum nigrum*, Musky Storksbill *Erodium moschatum*, White Clover *Trifolium repens*, and just a few Common Sowthistle *Sonchus oleraceus*, and Spear (Scotch) Thistle *Cirsium vulgare*. There are also various invasive grasses and a few patches of bare ground.

### Creatures Seen

The Plantain Moth *Scopula rubraria* (Geometridae) (Fig. 1) was very common, staying close to the ground and flying only short distances when disturbed. The larvae of this moth feed on both Buck's Horn Plantain (Australian insects web site) and ribbed plantain (Common 1990).

Butterflies seen in the area were: Common Grass Blue *Zizina labradus* (Fig. 2), Meadow Argus *Junonia villida* (Fig. 3), and Cabbage White *Pieris rapae* (Fig. 4), all observed on Dandelion, Cat's Ear or Hawkbit flowers; Australian Painted Lady *Vanessa kershawi* (Fig. 5), seen on the ground; and Common Brown *Heteronympha merope* (Fig. 6), an occasional visitor more usually found among the eucalypts on the south-western side of the intersection. Since Braby (2005) mentions the genus *Arctotheca*, which would include Capeweed, as a food plant of Australian Painted Lady larvae, I hoped that more of these butterflies would be present, but I saw only one. Other insects seen on the Dandelion, Cat's Ear and Hawkbit flowers included Honey bee *Apis mellifera*, native bees *Homalictus punctatus* (Fig. 7) and



Fig. 1. Plantain moths



Fig. 2. Common Grass Blue



Fig. 3. Meadow Argus



Fig. 4. Cabbage White

*Lasioglossum (Chilalictus) lanarium* (Fig. 8), hover fly (Fig. 9), blowfly, a variety of tiny flies, and bugs from the superfamily Lygaeoidea (Fig. 10). During one of my visits, a sand wasp *Bembix* sp. came to a patch of bare ground, alighting only very briefly. It was a beautiful insect, about the size of a European wasp, with yellow eyes and a blue and black striped abdomen.

On lifting up the leaves of some of the weeds I glimpsed hosts of other arthropods scurrying away to safety: tiny red mites; elusive, well-camouflaged spiders; bugs and beetles (including weevils) of various shapes, sizes and colours; and numerous small brown ants. Early in the morning, many of the bugs and beetles could be seen on the footpath (see figure on p. 114). They either proceeded across to the nature strip where there was similar habitat, or returned whence they came. By about 9.30 am EDT most of them were well hidden in the vegetation, and generally remained so during daylight hours. The ants, by contrast, could be seen all day. In March, a few winged grasshoppers were present. I hadn't noticed them before, so I don't know if they were there all along or if they arrived after they were able to fly.

I never found out what those caterpillars would have turned into. According to staff at Museum Victoria (pers. comm.), they were probably larvae of moths in the family Noctuidae, a family with almost 2000 species (Zborowski and Storey 2003). They must have been unpalatable to birds, because although easy to see, they were not eaten by the Australian Magpies *Cracticus tibicen*, Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* or Common Myna *S. tristis* that forage in the general area. An even worse fate awaited them, for on 6 January 2010 their brief lives ended when they were minced up by a lawnmower.

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### References

- Australian Insects website <<http://australian-insects.com/lepidoptera/ster/rubrar.html>> (viewed 24 April 2010)  
 Braby M (2005) *The complete field guide to butterflies of Australia* (CSIRO: Collingwood, Vic.)  
 Common, IFB (1990) *Moths of Australia* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne)  
 Zborowski P and Storey R (2003) *A field guide to insects in Australia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Reed New Holland: Sydney)



Fig. 5. Australian Painted Lady



Fig. 6. Common Brown



Fig. 7. Native bee



Fig. 8. Native bee



Fig. 9. Hover fly

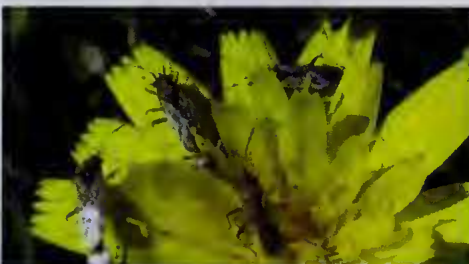


Fig. 10. Bugs from the superfamily Lygaeoidea